Are You Representin'?
Instructor Identity in Online Courses

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Abstract

Research in online learning (distributed learning, e-learning, web-based learning) suggests that students feel a sense of disorientation and isolation when they first begin an online course. The establishment of social and learning communities is critical for helping students adjust and succeed in the virtual classroom. Yet some levels of student anonymity can be empowering for online learning. How do students develop and claim their online identities? Do online instructors go through the same process, or are our identities given to us?

Relatively little is written on instructor identity. Current literature on student anonymity and identity is reviewed in an effort to understand the shared issues in the development of instructor identity. The role of social and learning communities and the impact of instructor immediacy and motivating behaviours are explored in the context of their influence on the development of an online identity. This paper suggests that instructor identity is a composite that is constructed from three separate identities evident in the virtual classroom: the textual, the visual, and the behavioural.

Introduction

Current discussions about online learning reveal that students may have a sense of disorientation, isolation, and disembodiment when they first begin an online course. Much is written about the strategies and behaviours instructors should employ to develop a sense of community to reduce the social and psychological distances inherent in the virtual classroom (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Singh & Pan, 2004; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002; Thorpe, 2001; Walker, 2003).

Research also indicates that a sense of student anonymity creates a 'safe' place for student discourse (Blake, 2000; Conceicao, 2002; Smith, et al., 2002). Issues of age, gender, race, socio-economic background, culture, etc., no longer determine how one's comments will be received. Shy students find their voice and experience the thrill of being validated by their classmates in public forums. Students feel more inclined to challenge the instructor and, as a result, become more empowered in their learning. Adult learning theory celebrates this shift in power from the instructor to the student, and we embrace our own shift in roles from lecturers to motivators (Easton, 2003; Shale, 2003; Thorpe, 2001; Walker, 2003).

It is obvious, however, that this presents a contradiction. If we need to get to know our students in order to create a welcoming community, how then do students maintain their sense of anonymity? Given that attrition rates in online courses are significantly high, and studies suggest it is because students are not motivated (Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004), how can we motivate students if we don't know who they are and what they need?

If anonymity works to empower students, does instructor anonymity help or hinder our efforts to teach? Do our teacher identities from the face-to-face classroom transfer intact into the virtual classroom?

I have been teaching business communication courses online for six years while also teaching the same courses face to face. Often I am struck by my own multiple teaching personalities and identities. Student evaluations from my in-class courses refer to my passion, my enthusiasm, and my animated way of keeping the class interesting. I tell real-life stories and encourage stories from students to emphasize key points as I try to bring the real world into the classroom. I move from theory to practice by giving examples and creating group activities when I perceive a need to meet the variety of learning styles, levels of boredom, time before/after lunch, etc. Teaching face-to-face is as much about watching and responding to students as it is about being a content expert. For me, teaching is a transactional experience, and one where my personality plays an important role in how the class in conducted.

In my online course, there is no animation, no impromptu stories when the class is bored, no inflection in my voice indicating humour, seriousness, or otherwise. The course content is delivered in a more linear fashion, with weekly readings, postings, and assignments. Student feedback about my role as teacher has centered around my organization of the learning materials, my promptness of responding to student queries, and my student feedback on assignments. No one comments on my passion, my enthusiasm, or my skills to keep the course interesting. When I think about who I am in the classroom, and who I am in the virtual, I wonder if I have represented the 'real' me. Have I created and claimed my own online identity or has it been given to me?

It is evident students *and* instructors experience some level of online disidentification. Hodges defines disidentification as "a split between a person's activities and their relations with participation, a rupture between what a person is actually doing, and how a person finds themselves located in the 'community'"(as cited in Walker, 2003, p. 57).

Thus the discussion of online identities vs. classroom identities is relevant for both groups, and indeed, some of the literature on one group is relevant for the other. For these reasons, both groups will be discussed in this paper, beginning with a review of the issues affecting student identity, and then how those issues influence the construction of instructor identity.

Student Identity

Current trends in online learning indicate that student demographics are shifting to more mature and motivated students with work experiences (Easton, 2003). These students are typically older, self-disciplined, and independent learners. Most have had prior learning experiences in traditional classrooms. Yet online students have higher rates of attrition than students in traditional classrooms (Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004). Do the students' sense of anonymity and a perceived alienation from a community in the virtual classroom play a role?

Anonymity

Student anonymity in online learning has been found to have many positive influences on the learning experience (Blake, 2000; Smith et al., 2002). Individuals can be vulnerable to their own personal biases and prejudices, thus eliminating physical or auditory indicators of gender, age, ethnicity, disability, and physical attractiveness can have a positive influence on interactions. In addition, students can become empowered to determine the degree of their own self-disclosure. At its most creative, anonymity not only provides students with an opportunity to alter features of their identity or personality, but it also allows them freedom to construct a new identity.

The act of obscuring a personal identity, may, in fact, encourage the emergence of a more substantial "academic identity" (Blake, 2000, p. 191). Students often feel more comfortable contributing to online discussions than they would in classroom discussions. When students realize that their thoughts will be exposed to others, often semi-permanently, it inspires a deeper level of discourse and more profound learning in this safe and somewhat anonymous classroom (Smith et al., 2002, Walker, 2003). Given that much of online learning is text-based and predicated on writing and language skills, students with language difficulties find that the posting of their carefully edited perspectives can be more effective to their learning and to that of others than it is to speak in front of a class. Conversely, there is a problem with relying on a student's writing identity. When writing is the only mode used to demonstrate knowledge in online courses, poor writers may be given an academic identity that does not accurately represent their level of understanding or ability.

Conceicao (2002) explored the implications of the social and cultural contexts of gender and nationality when she was learning in an online environment. While she initially expected to feel lonely and detached working in solitude with her computer, she discovered that her energies were instead directed towards interacting with others in the course and self-directing her own learning. She found that the online environment gave her a 'safe place' for intellectual growth, and for the expression of views often not supported in a face-to-face environment. She views her anonymity as an emancipatory experience (p. 43).

Anonymity also promotes more equality between students and instructors, divesting the teachers of some authority (Conceicao, 2002; Easton, 2003; Shale, 2003; Singh & Pan, 2004; Smith et al., 2002; Walker, 2003). Students feel more confident to challenge the instructor and to debate ideas. The environment becomes learner centered, and the experiences and knowledge of all

class members are reinforced and validated. Teacher-student and student-student relationships can be stronger online than in traditional classroom environments.

Despite the advantages of being anonymous, Kirkup (2001) suggests that there is still a need to present a person's *authentic* self, such as appearance and behaviour, to others. She believes that people feel uncomfortable if they cannot ascribe gender, race, class, and language to another person (p.78). My students often intentionally seek out the personal details of their classmates by asking where they live, what courses they are taking, their relationship status, etc.

Yet, identities are not completely anonymous in the online classroom. Students' names can indicate gender, race, or nationality (Blake, 2000). Students often are asked to post "getting to know you" entries where some self-disclosure is evident, and may be asked to post pictures of themselves. Gender differences and gender-related assumptions exist in online messages as they do in regular exchanges (Kirkup, 2001; Meyer, 2003). Even when anonymous, students often can't help but display their authentic and genuine personalities and beliefs online.

The quality of the student's writing itself can create a "writer's identity", and the writer's use of linguistics and modes of discourse, such as slang and humour, can suggest a "social identity" (Blake, 2000, p. 191). As in face-to-face interactions where the receiver perceives an unintentional non-verbal message from the sender, in online communication the writer's personality is evident in word, punctuation, and grammar choices. Smith et al. (2002) also found a person's consistency in writing and expressing ideas and attitudes helped the instructors not only get a sense of the students' identity, but it was strong enough to help minimize the issue of online cheating (p. 66). In my courses, it is easy to spot a student's work when I compare writing style in postings with assignment submissions.

One problem related to student anonymity is an increase in student aggression with instructors. Students may feel more comfortable demonstrating aggressive behaviours in the online environment than in face-to-face encounters (Smith et al., 2002). This has been true in my experience, where I have encountered more confrontational interactions from my online students than with face-to-face students.

Does being anonymous contribute to the students' sense of isolation and alienation? In a study of online students and what they consider as distressing when taking distance courses, Hara and Kling (2000) discovered that students do not always consider themselves as isolated. Interviews of online students revealed that they experienced two main distresses when taking online courses, both unrelated to being anonymous or being isolated: encountering technical problems, and not receiving clear instructions or prompt feedback from their instructors. The authors discovered that the main reason students did not feel isolated was that the class had bonded as a community.

Personal anonymity and the ability to create an online identity appear to have an empowering and positive influence on students' learning, but the impact of a community might be the larger factor in contributing to a student's sense of belonging, motivation, and success in online learning.

Community

Belonging to a community in a web-based course helps students develop their online identity and reduce their sense of isolation. There is an inherent desire for human relationships where one can share identities, engage in discourse, and challenge values even if it is through a computer screen (Arbaugh, 2001; Kirkup, 2001; Wingard, 2004). However, what does a community look like in the context of the virtual classroom?

Authors on the subject of education and e-learning basically refer to two types of online communities: the social community and the learning community. The social community is created when students and instructors develop functional personal relationships, and it is from this sense of connection and belonging that an effective learning environment can emerge (Blake, 2000; Conceicao, 2002; Easton, 2003; Meyer 2003; Robbin, 2001).

Anderson et al. (2001) refer to an online community as one of *inquiry*, a multifaceted framework of three overlapping components: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. In their research, all three components overlap and are critical to the learning of content, but it is the teaching presence that may be most pervasive and foundational for the development of both the social community and the learning community.

Social community. The development of a social community begins from the moment a student logs into the course and is welcomed into the virtual environment. But it does not stop there—a social community must be nurtured and maintained throughout the course to be effective.

How does an effective social community get established when the members never see each other face to face and personal characteristics can be obscured and mitigated? Some authors suggest that integral to the creation of a welcoming, humanizing, and social environment is the ability to get to know the students, and their backgrounds, interests, and level of experiences (Conceicao, 2002; Meyer, 2003). Strategies include ice-breaking activities, setting clear expectations, and having students post biographies and pictures of themselves (Hodges, 2004). In my courses, I do ask that students post a short autobiography that describes the program they are in, their career aspirations, and one interesting thing about themselves. They are also asked to post a picture. I always am intrigued by the depth of detail that they share with us, such as the student who described his recovery from cancer and posted a picture of himself that showed his cancerous skin lesions.

Feedback from students about this activity has generally been positive. One of my current students sent me this comment after the first week of the course:

> I have enjoyed the projects that we have done so far in week one. It was interesting to read the other students' home pages to get to know who the other students are in the class. I was worried about taking courses on-line that it would lack the structure and auditory aspects of the class room environment but so far I am finding that you have developed the course to meet those needs. I am looking forward to learning more. (Student e-mail, May 15, 2005)

Yet, there is a paradox of having students post autobiographies and pictures to help establish a social community, the act of which may expose them beyond the safety of their anonymity. Perhaps it is of some benefit that I have no way of knowing if the information the students have chosen to share or the pictures they have selected are genuine, and it may not matter to the development of the social community if students are not exactly who they say they are (Kirkup, 2001, p. 80). One of my students was a police officer who was uncomfortable posting a picture of himself, so he chose to post a picture of a highly identifiable character on a well-known police series.

There are two key components to maintaining a successful social community throughout the course: encouraging regular contributions of all the class participants and using immediacy behaviours to establish a sense of camaraderie (Arbaugh, 2001; Meyer, 2003; Walker, 2003; Wingard, 2004).

Immediacy "refers to the communication behaviours that reduce social and psychological distance between people; it includes both nonverbal and verbal behaviours" (Arbaugh, 2001, p. 43). These behaviours contribute to the sense of being important and valued by another. As in face-to-face interactions, the online instructor can demonstrate immediacy behaviours and can be instrumental in encouraging all participants to do the same with each other.

Immediacy in an online environment involves writing in language that is inviting and conversational, using personal examples and humour, encouraging feedback, and addressing each other by name. It can also include the use of pictures, video clips, audio clips, and emoticons, as a way to humanize and personalize the exchanges (Arbaugh, 2001; Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004).

In my online courses, I have two video clips and at least four pictures of myself sprinkled throughout the coursework. I make a point of e-mailing each student individually after I have read their autobiographies and in my comments I refer to the personal as well as the academic:

> Your description of yourself is clear, informative, and interesting. You sound busy working at Walmart, golfing, and playing hockey. Your picture gives us a good sense of who you are. Well done. (Message to a student, May 23, 2005)

A strong social community forms the foundation upon which to build an effective learning community.

Learning community. The role of a learning community is pivotal in education, as summarized by Smith in *Handbook of Online Learning, 2002*:

> …The defining feature of an educational experience is transforming "tacit knowledge" (which is a personal and private understanding often difficult for the individual to fully realize and articulate) into explicit knowledge (knowledge that is made public by communicating and explaining it in a formal systematic language to a community of

peers)…This transformation requires active participation in a learning community and ready communication among its members. (cited in Shale, 2003, p. 397)

While immediacy may be integral for the success of creating and maintaining a social community, motivating students may be fundamental for the success of a learning environment (Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004; Robbin, 2001). Specific motivational strategies for an effective learning community include designing a user-friendly course, assisting students with technical issues, asking questions to stimulate discussions, keeping threaded discussions on track, using a variety of instructional methods to meet different learning styles, keeping content relevant to the learner, giving frequent and detailed feedback, and keeping the experience positive and upbeat (Anderson et al., 2001; Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004; Meyer, 2003; Singh & Pan, 2004; Walker, 2003). The instructor needs to have an 'online presence', a psychological perception that the instructor is 'with them', mentoring and facilitating every step of the way (Anderson et al., 2001; Shale, 2003; Smith et al., 2002).

Wenger describes what could be the quintessential definition of how to motivate students:

[We should be] inventive and enthusiastic about what we love best, so that we engage our students; to open their horizons, so that they can put themselves on learning trajectories that they can identify with; and to involve them in actions, discussions, and reflections that make a difference to the communities they value. (as cited in Robbin, 2001, p. 10)

However, there are some barriers to creating effective social and learning environments. The highly motivated and independent learners that make up a large number of students who seek online learning can also be more resistant to working in groups and spending time in social activities (Easton, 2003). One of the main reasons online learning is attractive for students is its convenience and fit with individual schedules; thus getting students to work in collaborative groups online is challenging and difficult (Thorpe, 2001). This is evident with some of my experienced online students who have told me they find the social activities a nuisance. The main reason they say they take my online section instead of a section on campus is because they simply want to get the coursework done on their schedule, and that they are not the least bit interested in finding out who else is in the class.

Some courses on applied subjects simply do not lend themselves well to student interactions and discussion and debate. For example, a course in anatomy and physiology in which students learn to identify, name and describe the parts of the body would not have much to discuss or debate. My course in business communication is mostly about doing the actual writing, so when I encourage student discussion on issues related to business some students get impatient with what they consider to be unrelated to course objectives.

Another factor is that we tend to think of teaching/learning as a social activity, but regard the act of studying as a more private and solitary activity (Blake, 2000). Students may perceive online learning as more akin to studying, and may prefer to learn their course material in a more direct, independent, and solitary way.

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These factors serve to illuminate that there is no one 'right' way to teach online, just as there isn't only one strategy to use in the classroom. Wenger suggests that we shouldn't try to overly structure effective teaching:

> Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately, it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning; it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design. And yet there are few more urgent tasks than to design social infrastructures that foster learning…Those who can understand the informal yet structured, experiential yet social, character of learning, and can translate their insights into designs in the service of learning, will be the architects of our tomorrow. (as cited in Robbin, 2001, p. 10)

The review of the role that anonymity and community have on students' online identities and their concomitant success in e-learning informs the discussion of instructor online identity. We go through a similar process, although more factors influence the construction of our identities.

Instructor Identity

Last spring, when I went on sabbatical, a colleague took over my online course. But when faced with what to do with the pictures and the video/audio clips of me in the course, he paused to consider the possibilities. Did he want to insert his identity into my course, or would it be more fun to continue on, pretending to be me, or would this be an opportunity to be someone completely different? He offered these thoughts in a newsletter editorial:

> It might seem unsporting for me to hide out as a disembodied e-persona. At the same time, I want to be loved, like everyone else, and would they love me, the pic [sic] and/or video-clip me, that is? Would my presence be reassuring and pro-activating for my students or just the opposite? Will they *get* me, I wondered, in all my complexity, without actually knowing me 3-d or spending time with me in the same room; will my virtual presence warm the cockles of their hearts…or turn them off? (Dubanski, 2004, p. 2)

He comically suggests that the courses should have a menu of stereotypical instructor avatars to select for ourselves, ones we could develop our virtual personalities around: "like the Quirky Geezer Prof: crusty and eccentric…, or the Edgy Post-Modern Prof: black clad, smoking a virtual Gauloise…or the Importance-of-Being-Earnest-about-Everything Prof: middle-aged, middle-browed, mid-muddle, in Birkenstocks…" (p. 2).

Despite the humorous tone, this conundrum is shared by many online educators and is creating spirited discussion in the literature (Blake, 2000; Hawisher, 2000; Kirkup, 2001). How do we present our identities? Can they be constructed to suit the course? Would an avatar (graphical icon) effectively represent who we are and what we stand for? Does it matter if we're authentic or if we're constructed?

Rogers and Freiberg (1994) offers a philosophical perspective that might be useful in guiding our answers to these questions. On the subject of the qualities that best facilitate learning, they believe that one of the most essential elements of teachers was that they were 'real' or genuine. They stressed that teachers were most effective when they were being themselves, allowing their personal convictions, feelings, and moods to enter the classroom. They believe that it helped learning if the teacher "is a person to her [sic] students, not a faceless embodiment of a curricular requirement nor a sterile tube through which knowledge is passed…" (p. 154). Good teachers are real people who can develop real relationships with their students.

So, how do we go about being 'real' in the virtual classroom? One approach is to utilize the textual, visual, and behavioural to construct a composite of our identity.

Textual Identity

As in the discussion on student identity, we also have our own "writer identities" and "social identities". The quality of our writing and our use of linguistics and humour give the readers a sense of our personalities. Our text-based speech patterns can become recognizable to students (Blake, 2000, Smith et al., 2002).

However, does our writing always reflect our authentic selves? Before I post or send anything to students, I take time, use reflection, and incorporate editing to ensure the right tone. I take care to write clearly and succinctly to avoid misunderstandings. But can this deliberate drafting and revising process edit out my personality? These strategies are not always readily exercised in my 'real time' discussions in the classroom. There, with all the non-verbals involved (tone, facial expressions, and body language), it is almost impossible not to incorporate the personal into the academic. I am sure there are times when I am perceived to be friendlier online than I am in the classroom and vice versa.

But, as in the classroom, online instruction should include allowing our personal interests and moods to flourish, not only to demonstrate our authentic selves, but to be part of our teaching strategies to engage and interest students (Blake, 2000). Yet it is difficult to write exactly the way I teach face to face. My online courses are almost all text-based, where the students' learning activities involve reading the course materials (web-based and textbook), reading the discussion postings, and reading my feedback messages. Is it beneficial to their learning to add extra reading by including the anecdotal stories I use in the classroom? Can a written narrative be as memorable for learning as it is when acted out in the class? My written messages give some indication of my identity, but due to the very nature of the medium, it may not fully represent who I am.

The design of the course and how it is presented gives additional clues to our identities. Just as these are factors in motivating students, the organization of our material, how well the course flows, and the variety of learning activities used to meet different learning styles, all contribute to a sense of who we are (Easton, 2003; Hodges, 2004; Meyer, 2003; Singh & Pan, 2004; Walker, 2003). Students have given me feedback that I am organized, extrapolating a personal characteristic from the design of the course.

Visual Identity

The visual portion of our identity refers to our personal appearance and to that of our virtual environment. The issue of the visual representation of our physical appearance centers around three aspects: whether or not to include a photograph, the choice of the image, and the construction of a new image.

Some fear exists that including a physical representation of ourselves can overshadow our textual representation (Kirkup, 2001). Will students interpret an image in a way that minimizes the impact of our written messages? A few years ago, someone saw my picture on my webpage and commented that I looked "mean". She thought it had been intentional — to look serious. She was wrong; I chose the picture because my hair looked nice. I changed the picture immediately to one where I was smiling so it would be more congruent with what I perceived as the online friendly 'textual me'.

One of the most perplexing decisions of online instructors is not whether or not to include our picture, but how to choose one that best represents who we are. Can one photographic image effectively represent the 'real' you? A photograph gives a limited image that is caught in time and space without sound or smell. Do you choose a picture with your family (secure and traditional), or one of you cavorting with friends (fun and likable), or one engaging in a sport (outdoorsy and active)? The one that we choose may say more about us than the actual photo (Kirkup, 2001; Hawisher, 2000).

Some instructors have added video/audio clips into their courses to bring a higher level of immediacy to the course and to personalize their identity (Arbaugh, 2001). I have two video clips in my course: one as a "talking head", where I introduce students to the course in the first week, and one later in the course where I demonstrate a mini persuasive presentation with my dog. I received this unsolicited student feedback recently:

> Your persuasive video about the Portuguese Water Dog really brought your online presence to life and I would like to suggest all online instructors try and include something similar, perhaps in their opening welcome. (Student comment, e-mail, April 30, 2005)

However, incorporating video/audio clips into a course requires technical support for filming, video-streaming, etc. Some students may not be able to access the clip if they do not have the viewing software or speakers.

It is possible to create a more of an authentic online identity by constructing "quirky" representations of ourselves through altered photos, cartoons, avatars, and animations (Hawisher, 2000, p. 548). We can use the technology to represent who we think we are, or who we'd like to be. We can include aspects of our personal lives: our favourite books, our art or poetry, our favourite vacation spots, etc. We can photoshop our images (standing on Mt. Everest) to indicate our aspirations. This blurring of our physical and virtual selves into something creative celebrates who we are and might send a clearer message of our identity.

Our visual representation is not just about photographs. It is also about the appearance of the course — the colours, the font, the use of graphics and visuals. Just as the décor in our homes reflect our personalities, so does the design and construction of the course. Is it comfy and welcoming or functional and institutional? Does your online course look exactly the same as someone else's, or is the design uniquely yours? WebCT is a standard course program, yet even within its design, are many choices for icons, colours, fonts, and format. My course has many colourful photos and cartoons of people in business contexts sprinkled throughout the pages. The background colour of all the pages is a soft yellow with consistent visual cues for each section such as pink boxes to highlight required readings and blue boxes to signal assignment criteria. Visual appearance and readability is enhanced with the use of bulleted lists, headings, and white space. There are no daunting long paragraphs of text.

Hawisher (2000) describes the impact and the importance of the visual in online learning:

> Let us hope that our "homes" in cyberspace can contribute to our students' and our own positive sense of home…Let us make sure that the online pictures we produce work to convey the 1,000 words we wish to send. If we neglect tending to the visual in our professional work and our teaching lives, we are likely to wake up one morning to find that we live primarily in a world not only of the sound byte but also of the quick take. (p. 550)

Negatively impacting our online instructor identity is the burgeoning industry of online courses being developed by teams of content experts, web and graphic designers, and editors (Guide, 2005; Hawkes & Coldeway, 2002). Faculty may not have any input into, or the ability to modify, the course they are required to use (Anderson et al., 2001). Instead of teaching from our 'home', we are teaching in what is akin to a hotel room. Can these mass-produced, cookie-cutter courses effectively represent our personalities, our identities, and our understanding of educational theory and learner-centeredness?

Yet, even in these standardized online environments, our behaviours can still contribute to our identities, just as they do in traditional classrooms.

Behavioural Identity

Our behaviours in the virtual classroom send a message about our attitudes towards the students and our views about learning. Students are quick to attribute an identity based on how promptly we respond to queries, how frequently we interact with students, and how well we facilitate/manage discussions (Kirkup, 2001).

Anderson et al. (2001) refer to these behaviours as three components of our *teaching presence*: designing and organizing the course, facilitating discourse, and directing instruction. Inherent in these are the immediacy and motivational behaviours used to establish and maintain the social and learning communities as described earlier. Current research suggests that this teaching or *transactional* presence may have the strongest positive effect on student learning and student satisfaction (Cleveland-Innes & Garrison, 2005). One simple action is that I make an effort to

regularly post something in the forums. It isn't enough to log in daily; I have to show the students that I am there.

Clearly through the process of taking our classrooms out of buildings and into cyberspace, our roles and our identities are evolving from being a teacher to being a facilitator/mentor or a "learning manager" (Easton, 2003; Shale, 2003; Thorpe, 2001). Instructors should be skilled at teaching face to face, so that they can adapt and build on their teaching experiences in the virtual context. I have brought my experiences and skills as an educator and have retooled them for the online environment. All the while, I am constantly rethinking my own teaching philosophies. I am developing some comfort with the fact that I am no longer the teacher/performer in the front of the audience, but rather the director who sets the scenes and gently prods the cast to give their best performances.

Conclusion

The development of an instructor's online identity follows a similar progression of that of students. I initially experienced a sense of anonymity and disidentification, which created a degree of cognitive dissonance. This was the catalyst that propelled me forward to experience and accept a collaborative approach to learning with students. Through the use of immediacy and motivating behaviours in the online social and learning communities, my writer identity and social identity develops. I choose which pictures, colours, and formats to use for the course, creating a visual identity.

Once all these textual, visual, and behavioural cues are put together, like pieces in a puzzle, my online identity emerges. But it is not exactly the same identity as I have in the classroom. It has been adapted specifically for the online environment; one that better represents the *Ineinandersein*, the "in-one-anotherness", of online learning.

One final thought: It is not just that instructors need to be authentic, but education needs to be authentic, regardless of where it is conducted (Heathcote, 1988). We must be personally connected and passionately interested in the subject, open to new ideas, and able to engage students by understanding and using their passion and interest in the subject. To do this, we must embrace that we are constantly and simultaneously teaching and learning.

This is not only why education works; it is also why online learning works.

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